

**The Ohio State University Commencement Address
September 2, 1999
Delivered by John F. Wolfe
Chairman, The Dispatch Printing Company**

President Kirwan, Chairman Colley, Members of the Board of Trustees, Honorees, Vice Presidents, Deans, Members of the Faculty, Graduates, Family Members, and Guests:

"The students of this institution have often been addressed by men of exalted position and men of distinguished achievements and perhaps once or twice even by men of genius.

"This year your president has chosen that you shall be addressed by just an average citizen."

As applicable as those words would be today, as fitting as they would be if they were mine, they are not.

Those were the opening words of The Ohio State University commencement address of one hundred years ago, delivered by Professor James Willis Gleed of Topeka, Kansas.

Professor Gleed had been graduated from The Ohio State University 20 years before and had returned to his alma mater to deliver a commencement address he titled "Real Life."

Professor Gleed told the entire graduating class of 1899 -- some 99 students -- that most of them were destined to be, like him, average citizens.

It was anything but a disparaging observation.

Because real life, he correctly noted, consists not so much in attaining personal distinction or high social rank but in the never-ending work to simply become a better person.

Many things change over the course of one hundred years.

But the most important things do not.

That central message conveyed to those graduates of 1899 is just as true today and will be just as true in 2099.

Each of our lives is a work in progress.

Each day we mold ourselves for better or for worse.

The advancement of society depends on each individual's commitment to continual improvement, to refine oneself to the best of one's abilities.

Speaking of refining oneself: Newspaper publishers, it's often been said, spend their time separating the wheat from the chaff. And then print the chaff.

My response to that criticism has always been: "We may not be right, but we're never in doubt."

Considering the many distinguished women and men who have addressed these ceremonies throughout the years, it is an honor to be with you today, because The Ohio State University is one of the nation's truly great institutions of higher education.

It is the crown jewel of this state's system of higher education. It has made enormous contributions to our state, the central Ohio community and the world at large.

Founded as a land grant college whose primary mission was to provide agricultural expertise to the country, it has excelled in that role and with the passage of time has moved on to provide groundbreaking research into so many of today's great challenges.

And the university is destined to play an even more significant role in the future.

It is positioned to do so because of the many sacrifices and contributions of time, of talent, and of money made by those who have gone before.

Like each individual life, the life of an institution is always a work in progress.

One hundred years ago, the trustees of this university were engaged in a great debate over whether to begin a medical college.

Today the medical colleges of this institution are among the finest in the land.

One hundred years ago, the Ohio State Athletic Association was looking around for a grandstand or bleachers so spectators to sporting events would have a place to sit.

Today, I don't have to tell anyone in this arena about the devoted following of Ohio State University athletics.

The Jerome Schottenstein Center and the new Ohio Stadium, which is under construction, bear witness to the success of the athletic programs.

Each of us has a role to play in fostering the progress of this university.

Our family takes pride in the fact that we have a special relationship with the James Cancer Hospital and Solove Research Institute.

Ann, my wife, has had a 20-year association with Children's Hospital - the home of the pediatric department of the College of Medicine.

And I have been privileged to be associated with The Ohio State University Foundation and The Wexner Center for the Arts.

These experiences have engaged us in the intellectual life of this remarkable university.

In medicine, in athletics, in business, in the arts, in any pursuit or discipline represented at this university, those who have gone before - by their hard work and dedication and generosity - have created exceptional opportunities that the students, faculty and citizens of Ohio enjoy today.

Consider your own progress.

During your primary and secondary education years, you lived in a structured environment at home and at school.

In the much less structured environment of a university campus, you have become more self-reliant. You have faced difficulties, overcome them, and grown in confidence.

Now you stand on a new threshold.

From here, you set your own goals and the path to obtain them.

This will be more challenging.

But the opportunity for reaching your goals, and obtaining the rewards for doing so, are greater in America than anywhere in the world.

When graduates of a century ago listened to Professor Glead, they were among the most privileged young people in American society.

In 1899, fewer than 2 percent of Americans had the privilege of attending college. And I stress privilege because college

attendance is not a right. Those who attended college at that time were among the elite.

Today, well over one-third of Americans have that opportunity.

And the numbers continue to expand.

You are fortunate to have been among them.

You have come from around this country, and around the world, each seeking to become a better person.

But you owe part of your success to the sacrifices of others - especially your families.

They have provided the encouragement, the love, and the support to further your education.

Please don't forget their contribution. Gratitude is a virtue that will stand you in good stead in the years ahead.

I certainly don't mean to diminish the commitment and effort you have made that allows you to be here today. You are to be congratulated for taking advantage of the educational opportunity you have been afforded.

Seizing the opportunities presented you will be the key to your continuing success throughout your careers, and your future years.

Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund advises: "Each of us must take the initiative to create our opportunities, not waiting around for favors. We must not assume a door is closed but must push on it. We must not assume if it was closed yesterday that it's closed today."

The era we live in represents both the most challenging and most rewarding of times.

On many fronts, change is occurring more quickly than our capacity to absorb it. We can feel overwhelmed by it.

On the other hand, advancements in the quality of life make it hard to dispute that today is the greatest time to be living in the history of the world.

There are more opportunities for more people to live rewarding and productive lives than ever before.

No matter what you do in this life - be it in education, or business, or any other endeavor - do your very best.

No one excels at everything.

Each of us falls short from time to time.

Expect to have failures.

Failure is a natural part of learning and growing.

Learn from your failures and move forward.

A key to success is not letting failure deter your resolve.

Phil Jackson, the coach of those brilliant Chicago Bulls teams of the past, has written: "Losing is a lens through which you can see yourself more clearly. Obsessing about winning adds an unnecessary layer of pressure that constricts the body and spirit and, ultimately, robs you of the freedom to do your best."

Each of us can make a valuable contribution.

Each of us can lead a life that will have been worth living.

But you will never discover that worth, never discover your potential, never forge the life that might have been, unless you commit yourself to doing your very best in all that you undertake.

I have observed that a lot of people are perceived as having been lucky in their lives. Just as true is the observation that those who work the hardest usually end up being the luckiest.

The Declaration of Independence promises life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. It makes no guarantees of success.

This country offers great opportunity to everyone, but only those who are committed to working hard, to giving their best all the time, are going to maximize the opportunities that are available to them.

In the early stages of your lives, most of you have been the beneficiaries of the work of others.

Now, as you are about to make a transition into the world of careers and opportunities, think about the legacy that you may leave to those who follow you.

A legend at Ohio State, Woody Hayes, who knew the essays of Emerson as well as he knew off-tackle plays, often said that you cannot pay back, you can only pay forward.

Paying forward.

For each one of us, the most important test of life is: What did you do with what you were given?

Did you build upon it?

Did you make it better?

Will those who come after you benefit by your having been here?

This university today is immeasurably better than it was one hundred years ago because of the efforts and contributions of thousands of people.

Most of you today have enormously greater opportunities than your parents and grandparents, because of their sacrifices.

You honor their memory and build a better society by paying forward.

By giving of yourself, your talent, and your resources.

The university's alma mater - Carmen, Ohio, written almost 100 years ago, describes how the seasons pass and how the years will roll.

And indeed they will.

James Thurber, a great writer and alumnus of this institution, was right when he wrote: "If a thing cannot endure laughter, it is not a good thing."

Be involved in your community, be an active participant.

Find the best in others. In doing that, you will find the best in yourselves.

Your formal education, as we used to call it, may be ending. But hopefully you are still in the very early stages of a lifetime of learning, growing, and becoming the person you have the potential of being.

Congratulations to all the members of the Class of 1999.

Best wishes for a successful career.

But more importantly, best wishes for an exemplary life.